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ABSTRACT

A study of three rural high schools in northern Tasmania (Australia) examined why vocational education and training (VET) programs had been established and what made them work. Three principals, four VET coordinators, and nine students were interviewed and two student focus groups were conducted. Results indicate that VET programs were established to improve retention rates of students after year 10. Until recently, most rural high schools in Tasmania did not offer years 11 and 12. Students had to move to larger regional centers to complete their schooling. Up to 50 percent of students returned to their home town in two of the study sites before completing year 11 due to difficulties related to relocation to new schools in large towns. There was also a need to provide education for local adults. Adults participating in local VET programs fell into two groups--young adults seeking further training to be eligible for the Common Youth Allowance, and mature adults seeking to upgrade skills or enter the workforce. Program outcomes included improvements in numeracy, literacy, and social skills; improved retention rates; updated work skills; improved attitudes towards education; new opportunities for staff due to the broader academic offerings; and an increased engagement with the community due to the new role of schools as providers of lifelong learning. Factors contributing to the success of VET programs included the vision of school leaders and their success in forming partnerships with local employers and students. (Contains 25 references.) (TD)

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN TASMANIAN RURAL SCHOOLS: EDUCATION FOR THE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Australian rural high schools have expanded their programs in recent years to include vocational education and training (VET) courses. While VET in schools programs were established primarily to address the needs of Year 11 and 12 students, there has been an unexpected interest and participation by adults in these programs in rural Tasmanian schools. This suggests that the schools are filling a previously unmet need in small rural communities.

Adults participating in VET in schools programs fall into two distinct groups. They are young adults who must undertake further training to be eligible for the Common Youth Allowance and mature aged adults who are seeking training to upgrade skills or enter the workforce. Time and cost of travel are major impediments to undertaking study in a regional centre.

This study examines three rural schools in Tasmania to understand why VET programs have been established, what makes them work, and the initial outcomes for students and schools.

The role of the schools in the study has changed to embrace lifelong learning for the community. Two factors have contributed to the change to the new role. First, the vision of school leaders and second, their success in implementing major changes that extend beyond the school. These changes have affected the perceptions of the school held by staff, students and members of the wider community.

Background

Vocational education and training in schools is recognised by national VET policy documents such as A Bridge to the Future (Australian National Training Authority, 1998) as a way of addressing the training needs of young people making the transition from school to work. The strategy recognises that access to opportunities for adults to undertake further education and training is limited for those living in rural communities, and states that initiatives are needed to offer learning pathways to equity groups including people in rural and remote communities.

Evidence from projects such as Golding and Volkoff (1999), whose large scale longitudinal study investigated outcomes for VET students in four states and territories, suggests that there are significant outcomes for individuals, families and communities beyond any employment outcomes that may follow acquisition of VET qualifications. These outcomes include improved self-confidence, providing appropriate role models for children and skills which are used in community groups to benefit others.

VET in Schools

The purpose for establishing VET in schools is to encourage student retention, increase employment chances, prepare students for work life and provide specific skills for work (ANTA 1999). VET programs can provide formally recognised qualifications for school students and are based on national industry competency standards which have been determined outside the general school curriculum.

In 1999, almost 90% of Australian schools with senior secondary classes offered some type of formal VET program for students, up from 62% in 1996 (ANTA, 1999). However, only 12.1% of students were involved in these programs (Misko, 1999).

The effectiveness of VET in schools programs in terms of outcomes for students has yet to be fully evaluated. The Australian Youth Survey, which follows the destination of students who undertook vocational courses in the early 1990's, indicates that most VET students were not appreciably better off when making the transition to full time employment than were early school leavers (Ball & Lamb, 1999). A recent study commissioned by Education Victoria shows better outcomes, with only 10.9% of Year 12 leavers from VET in schools programs ending up in part time employment unemployment. The remainder were in full time work or education (Polesel, Teese, O'Brien, & Unger, 1999).

Benefits associated with VET in schools programs, particularly the work placement component, include assistance with employment related decisions, improved knowledge and understanding of industry and the world of work, increased self awareness, and improved personal and interpersonal skills (Misko, 1999).

Recent research on VET programs in rural schools across Australia has identified a number of common factors

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which foster and support VET programs (Chiswell, Stafford, Stokes & Holdsworth, forthcoming; Misko, 1999). These factors include:

a commitment to vocational education reflected in the schools' aims and objectives,

the placement of such a commitment within the schools' broad educational goals,

the reflection of this commitment in programs that operate across the school and that are developed locally in response to local needs and conditions,

provision of adequate and on-going resources,

the existence of partnerships that extend beyond the school, including the establishment of a cluster arrangement with other schools to maximise resource use,

support by the community,

employment of a local coordinator who can help with work placements, and

a positive attitude by students towards more practical and work focused education.

There also are difficulties and barriers for rural schools to undertake and resource VET programs. These can include: a limited choice of opportunities for work placements, lack of adequate staffing, timetable conflicts with other subjects, additional workload for staff to understand and establish course requirements and inadequate teaching resources for VET (Kilpatrick & Guenther, 2000; Boston, 1998).

Educational Disadvantages for Rural Students

Lack of basic educational qualifications is one of the main reasons for lack of success in finding employment post school (Curtain, 1999). Coming from a rural background is associated with a higher likelihood of being unemployed and being long term unemployed (McClelland & McDonald, 1999). It appears there will be a growing inequality between Australia's young people based on differential access to education.

Lower retention rates for rural students to Year 12 as compared with their urban counterparts contributes to a disadvantage for entry and completion of post compulsory education (Cunningham, Choate, Abbott-Chapman & Hughes 1992; Lamb, Long & Malley, 1998). Factors contributing to lower retention rates for rural students include not valuing formal education, the need to travel to access final years of schooling in some states, curriculum which is not attractive to rural students, and lower expectations of academic achievement (Cunningham et al, 1992).

Rural Australians are less likely to have post-school qualifications than those in metropolitan areas, and are less likely to have university level qualifications. Those people with lower levels of education experience more unemployment and are less likely to undertake further study due to lack of confidence in their ability as learners in formal training situations (Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998a). The concentration of tertiary institutions in urban areas means that there are fewer opportunities for post school education for adults in rural compared to urban communities. Adult learners are more likely to be successful if they have access to a support network (Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998b). Such a network can include fellow learners as well as expert teachers or facilitators.

Rural students are less likely to undertake post compulsory education for a number of reasons. Apart from having already secured employment, reasons may include: lack of information about appropriate courses through reduced access to further and higher educational facilities, transportation and accommodation costs, lack of confidence and desire to leave home and relocate in a larger town, time associated with travel and limited financial support. Limited opportunities for a variety of work experience in the final school years limits career choices. One of the most significant factors is lack of support and encouragement from parents for children to continue post compulsory education because there is a lack of education tradition in the family (Cunningham et al, 1992).

Schools and Rural Community Development

Rural schools are a central focus of activity within small rural communities, both for school-aged children and adults (Miller, 1998). A framework for considering partnership between schools and communities has been described as having three inter-related components: school as community centre, community as curriculum and school based enterprise (Miller, 1998). VET in schools programs can place the school as a community centre, having a role beyond the education of school-aged children and forging links with local business and the wider community. As one of a limited number of institutions present in rural communities, schools have the potential to become a focus for building social capital through facilitating networks and sharing expertise with the wider community (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

VET programs in rural schools provide an opportunity for developing mutually beneficial partnerships between schools, local businesses and regions/regional industries. There is an emerging awareness within education systems that community education, where students come from all age groups can 'contribute to the development of civic comminutes where learning is valued and actively endorsed by everyone' (Department of Education, 1999; 2000). Leadership plays a major role in creating effective school-community partnerships (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk & Mulford, 1999).

There are a number of innovative programs in Australia which have been jointly established by schools, local business and community members which have led to a reinvigoration of local economic activity and a re-engagement of local youth in meaningful work. In some localities, there has been a pathway established which leads students through school VET programs to post school training and into local industries (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk & Mulford, 2000; CRLRA, 2000).

Methodology

This paper is based on data collected from several site visits and interviews with school principals, school VET coordinators, VET students, and a regional VET coordinator in rural Tasmania. Interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire and were conducted in 1999 near the end of the school year. Questions were formed following identification of gaps in research literature on rural VET in schools programs.

Three district high schools were selected purposefully. The researchers were attempting to identify schools in small rural communities, with either a stable or declining population and limited youth employment opportunities which had established a VET in schools program. Each of the study sites selected was centred on a town population of less than 700 people in order to explore VET in schools programs in small rural communities.

In all, three principals, three school and one regional VET coordinators, and nine students were interviewed individually, and two focus groups of seven and five students were conducted. Interviews were analysed for themes following standard qualitative data analysis methods.

About the schools and communities

VET programs in Tasmanian schools are structured to provide nationally accredited qualifications and delivered by schools which are Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). The three schools selected were all located in northern Tasmania. The schools had between 150 and 500 pupils and between 14 and 30 staff. The schools were located in towns with populations ranging from 190 to 640. The major industries in the area surrounding the towns included forestry, viticulture, cropping, grazing, dairying and tourism. The distance to the nearest major regional centre ranged from 110 kilometres (study site 1) to 35 kilometres for study sites 2 and 3.

Study site 1 had run the VET program for two years, with seven students enrolled in 1998 and 11 in 1999. At study site 2, the course had run for one year only with eight students enrolled. In addition, there were up to 30 students participating in the computing class, primarily mature age men and women. At study site 3 there were nine students enrolled in the VET program. The ages of students ranged from 16 to 40 years.

The three district high schools offered a variety of VET courses. The schools delivered most of the courses, but also were auspicing agencies, providing support to students taking courses through other training organisations. The schools all demonstrated the development of some innovative partnerships with other schools and organisations, including a private community service organisation, to provide new opportunities for expansion of programs.

Two of the three schools had undergone the rigorous accreditation process to become a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). The third school was working in partnership with two other rural schools to gain accreditation as a joint RTO. This process was seen to embed the 'cluster' arrangement, promoted by the regional coordinator. Clusters facilitate cooperation and sharing of resources amongst three or four schools within the same region, and give a wider choice of subjects for students.

Profile of Students

While difficult to generalise across a number of schools, VET staff reported that the students tended to have poor literacy, numeracy, social and communication skills. At one school, the teachers recognised that the need to address these areas was the prime focus of the program. They used the framework of Year 11 and 12 Maths and English as a guide, but estimated that it would take two years to a one year course.

Results

Why do these Schools have VET Programs

In 1997, the Tasmanian Education Department funded a three-year project to employ regional VET coordinators

covering all rural areas of the state. The goal of this project was to improve retention rates of students post Year 10 in rural schools. In Tasmania, most district high schools have not until recently offered Years 11 and 12. Students from these small rural schools had to move to larger regional centres to undertake the final years of schooling. In 1998, the retention rate from Year 10 to Year 11 in the northern region of Tasmania was 66.4% (Department of Education, 1998). Retention rates from district high schools were lower than the average for the region.

At the time of this study not all rural high schools in Tasmania had VET in schools programs. The establishment of VET programs has depended on the initiative of school principals and senior staff in each school. There was little financial incentive to establish these programs. Even with the assistance of the regional VET coordinator, there was much work for the school.

One motivator was the consistent and worrying pattern of students who left home, moved into the regional centre and subsequently 'dropped out' of senior secondary college within the first 3 months, to return home to almost certain unemployment or under employment. Up to 50% of students returned to their home town in two of the study sites before completing Year 11. The difficulties for the students and their families relate to relocation of 15 and 16 year old students to a new school in a large town. The Year 11 and 12 students who did enrol in VET programs at the schools tended to have poor literacy, numeracy, social and communication skills, suggesting that had they enrolled in senior secondary college they would have been at risk of dropping out.

The schools in the study have also seen a need to provide education for local adults. VET programs provide accessible education for two quite different groups in the local community. The first group comprises young adults receiving the Common Youth Allowance who were required to undertake further training to be eligible for the allowance. Enrolling in a VET program at the local school provided a means of undertaking training without the cost and time associated with travelling into town.

The second group was mature aged people in the local community who were either employed or involved in home duties, and who were seeking further qualifications to develop new career opportunities or enter the workforce. This group had few opportunities for further training due to constraints of time, childcare responsibilities and/or existing work commitments to be able to attend courses in the regional centre. In the study sites, there were a number of adults enrolled in a VET course or a Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) subject at the local school.

Quotes from the students interviewed provide their perspective about why they have enrolled in the course.

It was just after my little girl was born and I needed something to do with my life like because I was single and everything, living out in the boonies again, and so I just thought well it's something that i've always been interested in, not school, but the horticulture side of things, yeah I always wanted to do it, and I thought well now is the time, seen it in the paper and I thought yep go for it, that's why I'm here. Beats laying around the house. (23 year old male Horticulture Certificate student)

I did the Certificate of Work Education last year - just wanted to get back into re-learning the Maths and English, and computing mainly - I really wanted to learn how to handle those things instead of having to ask my kids sort of thing.

(Mature age student).

Outcomes for Students and Schools

Year 11 and 12 students and the young adults on the Common Youth Allowance enrolled in VET courses with low numeracy, literacy and social skills benefited from small classes. Staff were able to focus on the needs of each student as well as helping to develop specific work skills. This built confidence, an important outcome for the students.

Although the programs were in their infancy, there already had been an improvement in retention rates. In one of the schools, the post Year 10 retention rate had risen from 50% to 100% and the introduction of the VET program was attributed by students and the school as the reason. However, not all students succeeded in their course, with those who enrolled in order to be eligible for the Youth Allowance being the group most likely to drop out.

For adults, a VET program was a means of updating work skills, gaining a nationally recognised certificate and improving opportunities to return to the workforce. Ease of access and low cost were cited as the main reason for enrolling at the local school. A number of adults had family or existing work responsibilities which made it difficult to travel to attend other educational institutions.

Students, including adults commented on how much they had enjoyed the practical nature of study, had developed a more positive attitude to study and had benefited from improved self confidence. For one of the students, it was the first time she had actually enjoyed her school experience. She reported her attitude to learning had changed

and she was able to make the link between learning at school and working. When asked what they got out of the course, these students replied:

Fun, I've enjoyed myself, and it's the most I've enjoyed school since oh since the day I left, I've learned a lot actually.... it helped me because, I've always been, like I said, a real outdoors type person, and we learnt a lot in class and then being able to go out and put it into practice..... it boosted a lot of confidence in people..... (young Horticulture Certificate student)

I thoroughly enjoyed it.....it has really brought me up to date with everything you don't feel quite so behind the kids any more. I absolutely adored doing English, and the work placement was the bit I loved the most, I've gone to the nursing homes.....my husband is unable to work, and I would dearly love to be able to work in a nursing home.....I need to find a job. It has motivated me to really look, and I am keeping my eyes open for any little thing - and if it has to be away from home, then so be it. If it is a nursing home job, and that's what I want, then I am going to go for it! (mature aged Community Care Certificate student).

The programs have assisted schools to enhance their viability in communities where the local population is static or declining and schools must retain and attract students in order to offer a broad academic program. VET programs offered new opportunities for staff; attracting new staff and utilising existing staff resources more efficiently. VET programs maintained or increased student numbers and hence school viability. The programs provided a new avenue for engaging the wider community in school activities and establishing the school as a centre for lifelong learning. By attracting local adults to participate in formal education, schools actively improved the attitude to education and learning and skills levels in the community as a whole.

Opportunities and Challenges for the Schools

There was considerable enthusiasm from staff and students for the programs and for expansion in the future. The school principals and coordinators in the three schools had a shared vision of playing a more strategic role in community renewal and development through partnerships with other schools, post secondary education providers and local business and local government. They communicated this vision to their staff, students, parents and the wider community.

In the short term, schools recognised a need to consolidate on the learning that had taken place. In the medium to long term, they identified a number of areas for expansion of delivery to post-school aged students. On-line delivery and linkage with school based 'skills centres' was seen as an important avenue for development. This would facilitate auspicing of programs offered by other providers, thus giving students enrolled in a much greater range of programs the support needed to ensure success (Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998b).

The challenges to growth and expansion related to resourcing within schools. The schools in the study reported a high turnover of staff, and indicated that the loss of one teacher can have a significant ripple effect on others' teaching loads. The development of credibility for the program with local employers depended very much on the relationships which were built by VET staff. Continuity of staff was important to ensure the relationships were maintained, particularly in the development phase.

A broad range of skills for effective delivery of VET were identified by staff. Indeed, it was clear that there was a need for a 'team' approach to satisfy not just the technical dimension of courses, but also skills in liaising and understanding business needs, adult education and teaching skills, and personal development and confidence building skills.

The need for the retention of a regional coordinator was identified as important to sustain momentum in the development phase of these programs. The need for a strong commitment from joint school and industry management committees was also identified. School staff indicated that these committees were not yet working to their potential. Communication of the vision of the school as a focus for learning for the whole community is an on-going challenge.

What Made it Work

Partnerships

The relationship between the schools, individual students and employers who provided work placements for students was important. The choices for placements are not as extensive as in city environments. However, where local employers saw opportunities to develop a local skilled labour force they were willing to provide work placements. Employers needed to understand what is expected of them when accepting a student for work placement. In rural areas there is a relatively high proportion of small business operators who have little experience in training for themselves or their employees. These business owners require additional support from the school to confidently take on work placement students. Partnerships are expanding; community, local government and local members of parliament are recognising and supporting the role of school VET programs in community renewal.

Staff

Staff involved in VET programs were committed and enthusiastic, worked with difficult timetables and put in extra time to make the program a success. They required different skills which included: the ability to teach adults, and help them build self confidence and self esteem, the ability to work with both criterion and competency based assessment (often simultaneously). As well they must be able to cope with wide age ranges in class, and recognise and respond to the needs of individuals. Staff reported that the flexibility to modify the curriculum to suit each student was a great strength of the program.

There was a strong desire amongst staff to make the program suceed, even though it frequently required additional work. Staff needed to be able to develop strong networks with employers and other community members, including finding appropriate people to teach specific technical elements of some of the courses.

Building relationships between the VET staff and local businesses was essential for the development the VET program. Establishing the credibility of the VET staff, the program and the participating students was an important element of this. Continuity of VET staff while relationships with employers were developing, was essential.

School Leadership and Culture

The enthusiasm and commitment of the school principal and senior staff played a vital role in the establishment and development of VET programs in rural schools. The vision of school leaders to broaden the role of schools beyond the education of school aged children to promoters of learning for the whole community is an indication of a wider agenda for schools in rural community renewal.

Providing separate facilities for VET students and developing a school culture that allows privileges and freedoms not available to the younger students was important. Treating VET students as adult learners with associated personal responsibility for their own learning improved learning outcomes. In addition, the presence of adult learners was a positive influence on school culture, providing valuable role models to younger and less motivated students.

The credibility associated with receiving a nationally recognised credential was important to the students and the schools. It gave the schools confidence to promote the VET program, with the knowledge that the Certificate's awarded to the students would be acceptable to industry as having equal status with Certificates gained through other training institutions.

Support Systems for Students

Strong support systems built up amongst the VET students. A number of students described the group as 'like family', implying a level of cooperation and support not experienced in other years at school. The support system helped with students learning and enjoyment of the course. This support system included the teachers who treated the students as adult equals. Small class sizes and the range of ages in the VET group assisted the development of these support networks.

The ability to be flexible to accommodate individual needs was a strength of the program in rural schools. There was a recognition by staff that they were there to help develop the 'whole' person. Work on helping students build self esteem and confidence was considered as important as the development of work skills. The staff became 'mentors' for other aspects of students' lives, offering help with both school and non-school issues. Staff acknowledged the difference between the VET group and other students by treating them as adult learners. This contributed to a view that the VET group was distinct from the main body of school students.

From the students' perspective, there was support for the teachers and their approach. They liked being treated as adults and thinking of the teachers as friends. They saw teachers as committed and enthusiastic. They commented on the importance of the practical nature of the study and for some, the ability to work and study outdoors (in the case of agriculture and horticulture). Staff and students saw the diversity of ages of students in the class as a positive benefit. The mature age students commented on the ease of access to the classes, the low cost and the relevance of the courses.

Support Systems for Staff and School

The regional VET coordinator encouraged and assisted schools to establish and implement VET programs. This person provided support for schools to undertake the rigorous process of RTO accreditation, assisted in the developmental stages of delivering VET courses and played a coordinating role between schools and VET staff. A network amongst the VET coordinators in schools operated to allow the sharing of ideas and information about VET programs in each school. The regional coordinator facilitated this group.

Parents of the VET students also played a role in supporting and encouraging their children to enrol in the VET program at the local school. The support of parents has been vital for schools to initiate VET. In one of the study schools, several parents enrolled themselves to ensure that there were enough students for the program to proceed.

Conclusion

The enthusiasm and commitment of the school principal and senior staff play a vital role in the establishment and development of VET in schools programs and enrolment of adult learners in rural schools. The programs meet the immediate training needs of individuals and provide opportunities for lifelong learning in the rural communities. The vision of school leaders (principals and senior staff) is to broaden the role of the schools beyond the education of school-aged children to be promoters of learning for the whole community. The communities have responded by embracing VET in schools in ways not encountered in urban areas.

The rural schools have used VET in schools programs to improve previously poor retention rates beyond Year 10 (Department of Education, 1998). The need to travel to a major regional centre to complete Years 11 and 12 and the costs and time associated with this are a major cause for high drop out rates for country students (Cunningham et al, 1992). The programs have partially redressed the lack educational opportunities available to rural post-compulsory school aged students, young adults and older people, reflected in low levels of post-school qualifications, low participation in the workforce and increased chances of under employment or unemployment (McClelland & McDonald, 1999; Curtain, 1999; Lamb et al, 1998).

There were clear benefits for the individuals who participated in the program similar to benefits identified by Misko (1999) in terms of information to make better decisions about work and study choices and improved personal and interpersonal skills, except that personal development was more important for the rural students here. The supportive nature of the program delivery was principally responsible for the self confidence and bolstered self esteem the students gained before entering the workforce.

The factors that make for successful provision of post-compulsory programs for both adults and young people in rural schools are consistent with Chiswell et al's (forthcoming) conditions for the success of VET in schools programs which emphasise commitment of the school and partnerships with the local community. The professional expertise of the school staff in this study and the skills of the school leaders in sharing their vision with the community, both within and outside the school fostered the conditions for success of the venture. The factors that lead to successful VET programs in this study are: commitment and enthusiasm from teachers and senior staff; the ability of the school to involve the local community; a supportive educational environment; a school culture that recognises and values adult learners; and the flexibility to cater for individual needs.

Expansion of the role of the schools is resource intensive. This research noted the value of appropriate teacher styles and relationships with the students, highlighting the need for professional development of teachers unfamiliar with working with adult learners. As well, professional development of teachers and VET coordinators to develop skills for interacting with people in the workplace and developing networks in the local community is required. Many of the things that make the program work are related to small, resource intensive, class sizes.

The impact of the VET programs on the community and local businesses is an area for future research. VET in schools programs increase the contact between schools and the community beyond traditional forms of association. This development of new networks plays an important role in building social capital in local communities (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). Making school resources and expertise accessible for use by community members through community education programs provides an important means of building new relationships with adults in the broader community. The experiences, expertise and role modelling they bring into the school environment will assist in changing the nature and role of rural schools, making them even more relevant and valuable to their communities.

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